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# The Increase of the Differentiation Level of the Self through Unifying Personal Development

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## Abstract

The paper reveals the dynamics of the differentiation process of the self, associated with psychic maturity. The research demonstrates the efficiency of a personal development program on the increase of the differentiation level of the self. The paper also emphasizes the correlations between this level and the levels of anxiety, depression, self-satisfaction and emotional intelligence. The retest took place two months after program and it confirmed the hypotheses. This is the first study revealing the dynamics of differentiation of the self and its multiple correlations. Moreover, it validates a personal development program in order to enhance this differentiation.

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## 1. Introduction

The present paper aims at revealing the differentiation process of the self, associated with psychic maturity. The applicative research of the paper demonstrated the efficiency of a personal development program focused on unification that increased the differentiation level of the self and, implicitly, the psychic maturity. The practical part also reveals the role played by the emotional intelligence in the dynamics of the differentiation of the self. The absolute novelty of the paper is related to both the theoretical aspect emphasized above and, especially, to the experimental research on the increase of the differentiation level of the self by means of a psychological approach, which rises from the ranks more and more at a global level: personal development within a group.

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## 2. Theoretical foundation

### 2.1. Bowen and the differentiation of the self

Murray Bowen [1] is regarded as one of the few comprehensive explanations of the psyche development, from a systemic and multigenerational perspective. Like any other trans-generational perspective, this conception is also focused on explaining the nature of interpersonal behaviors and intra-psyche structure through past relationships within the extended family, which are transmitted from generation to generation, thus influencing the present relationships.

Bowen's most important idea for the present paper is the individual's movement, generally in social environment and particularly in the couple relationship, on a two-pole axis: "*individuality*" (to be and to maintain oneself as an autonomous independent being) and "*togetherness*" (to be connected to another person or a group). Both tendencies are natural forces with instinctual roots. We will find this dynamic game between the two poles in all relationships, so these forces are universal. Successfully managing these two counter-balanced forces, which implies a control on emotionality, depends on the degree of differentiation of the self. "*The differentiation of the self*" is the most important variable of personality regarding maturity and the achievement of psychological sanity. The differentiation implies the ability to think and reflect especially in situations of emotional pressures and anxiety.

A differentiated self, called "*Solid Self*" by Bowen is characterized by:

- A high degree of autonomy when it is in a significant relationship with someone else;
- A capacity of distinguishing between subjective emotional processes and objective intellectual processes, which guide the behavior;
- Flexibility, adaptability and experiencing his own emotions.

Besides the solid Self, there is also the undifferentiated Self, called by the author "Pseudo-Self". This "*Fake Self*" will guide the person in life. This type of person is more rigid and emotionally dependent on the others. His/her behavior is more governed by emotions than reason.

Starting from Bowen's theory, Skowron and Friedlander [2] have developed their own instrument to test its validity. Consequently, the "*Differentiation of the Self Inventory*" appeared. The scale includes both intra-psyche and interpersonal components, namely thought-feeling (reason-emotion) and separation-fusion. This scale has four subscales, corresponding to the four dimensions of the differentiation and an overall grade regarding the differentiation level of the self. The four dimensions are:

- *Emotional reactivity* that shows the degree in which the individual responds to environmental stimuli through powerful emotional reactions, emotional lability, hypersensitivity;
- *Self position*, which shows the clarity of the meaning of the Self and the capacity to remain faithful to his/her own beliefs even when he/she is pressured by the others;
- *Emotional separation*, which reflects the feeling of threat when another person gets close, in a high degree of intimacy, and the vulnerability feeling in relationships;
- *Fusion*, which shows an emotional over-involvement with the others and over-identifications with the parents.

### 2.2. The differentiation of the self and the psychic maturity

In fully agreement with the theory underlying the Experiential Therapy of Unification regarding the profound psychic structure, the personality development process represents the intercession of building and re-building the self through the contact with its primordial source – the *Self* –, which enables the individual to express his own potential (Mitrofan [3], [4]). The first stage of this process is the differentiation of the self. After this first stage, the integration of the self takes place, by means of the re-connection with the *Self*, giving it the opportunity to

achieve itself, to fulfill itself and providing the self with a higher degree of maturity (Vancea [5]). At the end of this process, there is a certain type of personality called mature, integrated, self-actualized, unified etc.

### 3. Research methodology

#### 3.1. Purpose, objectives and hypotheses of the research

The present research is statistic, quantitative and experimental. Its purpose is to study the efficiency of an experiential program of analysis and personal development focused on unification, on the differentiation of the self, among students of the Psychology Faculties.

The objectives of this research were the following:

- To evaluate the differentiation level of the self in psychology students;
- To validate a program of analysis and personal development focused on unification (UPD) carried out in order to increase the DLS in psychology students;
- To evince the correlation between the following tendencies: anxiety, depression, self-satisfaction and the DLS;
- To emphasize the dynamics of the level of emotional intelligence in psychology students and the way in which it correlates with the DLS.

*Hypothesis 1:* The attendance at a program of analysis and personal development focused on unification (UPD) determines the increase of the DLS;

*Hypothesis 2:* The high levels of differentiation of the self correlate with low scores related to the levels of anxiety, depression and high scores of the levels of self-satisfaction and emotional intelligence.

#### 3.2. Research stages

The *first stage* consisted of the filling in of the battery of tests by the entire study sample, followed by the constitution of the experimental sample (60 participants) and of the control sample (60 participants). The classification was accomplished based on the experimental group participants' wish to participate in this UPD module. The *second stage* consisted of the design and the implementation of an experiential program of analysis and personal development focused on unification for the psychology students from the experimental group. The intervention program was conducted according to the UP method described by Mitrofan (2000, 2004) and it aimed at the inner unification (at the level of the self and of the personality) and at the unification of the self with the *Self*. The transformation at the level of personality is produced by the re-signification of life experiences due to the reminded unifications. Participants formed six workgroups and they had seven meetings, 16 hours each, every two months, an overall of 112 hours during 18 months. Each meeting followed the same steps: warm-up and accommodation, provocative exercise, analysis, activation of resources, choice and experimentation of the new strategies. The *third stage* consisted of retesting the participants from the two samples after two months from finishing the personal development program.

#### 3.3. Study sample

The study sample consisted of 120 students from the Psychology Faculties in Brasov, divided in two groups: the experimental group (60 subjects) and control group (60 subjects). Participants were aged 18 to 53, with a mean equal to 30.61. The students from the experimental group manifested their wish to participate in the UPD program.

#### 3.4. Work instruments

- The Differentiation of Self Inventory for the measurement of the DLS, by Skowron & Friedlander;
- Emotional Intelligence Test adapted by Mihaela Roco [6] according to Bar-On and D. Goleman for the measurement of the emotional intelligence level;
- Cattell Anxiety Questionnaire for the measurement of the general anxiety level;
- Beck's Depression Inventory for the measurement of the depression level;
- Bipolar scale for the assessment of self-satisfaction, our own instrument.

#### 4. Obtained outcomes

As it can also be seen in the graphical representations from figure 1, all the means of the variables regarding the differentiation of the self have increased due to the attendance at the UPD, in the experimental group. In the control group, there have been very small and statistically insignificant increases and decreases of the variables. Thus, *hypothesis 1* has been confirmed: the attendance at the UPD program has led to the statistically significant increase of the DLS (increase with 8.15). In the control group, the increase has been very small and statistically insignificant (0.97). This statistical analysis was accomplished by using the *t test* for paired samples. Significance threshold:  $p < 0.001$ .



Fig. 1. The dynamics of the differentiation of self coefficient in the (a) control group and (b) experimental group.

The correlations analysis evinced the following:

- The level of “overall anxiety” negatively correlates with the DLS ( $r = -0.743$ ,  $p < 0.001$ );
- The level of “depression” negatively correlates with the DLS ( $r = -0.606$ ,  $p < 0.001$ );
- The level of “self-satisfaction” positively correlates with the DLS ( $r = 0.570$ ,  $p < 0.001$ );
- The level of emotional intelligence positively correlates with the DLS ( $r = 0.285$ ,  $p = 0.003$ ).

These results show that hypothesis 2 has also been confirmed. The DLS correlates with low scores in anxiety and depression levels, as well as with high scores in self-satisfaction and emotional intelligence.

Regarding the dynamic of the other variables measured, it was noticed:

- The mean of the emotional intelligence level decreased by 3.8% in the control group, while in the experimental group it increased by 8.12% (statistically significant difference,  $p = 0.005$ );
- The mean of the anxiety level decreased by 2.62% in the control group and by 12.44% in the experimental group (statistically significant difference,  $p < 0.001$ );
- The mean of the depression level increased by 0.1% in the control group, while in the experimental group it decreased by 3.4% (statistically significant difference,  $p < 0.001$ );

- The mean of the self-satisfaction level increased by 1.41% in the control group and by 8.82 in the experimental group (statistically significant difference,  $p < 0.001$ ).

## 5. Conclusions

The present paper brings three major contributions due to the conducted practical research and to the theoretical analysis. The first contribution resides in describing the process of psychic maturity from the differentiation of the self standpoint, belonging to the systemic and multigenerational psychotherapy, corroborated with the perspective on human development of the experiential psychotherapy of unification. The intercession itself enriches both these visions. The second contribution of the paper is related to the validation of a unifying personal development program, addressed to psychology students, that increases the differentiation level of the self. Finally, the third contribution refers to the determination of the correlations that the differentiation level of the self has with the factorial triad (anxiety, depression, self-satisfaction) on the one hand and with the emotional intelligence on the other hand.

The results obtained validate the UPD program and support the vision regarding the new educational paradigm described by Laurentiu Mitrofan [7].

The practical relevance of the results obtained is that the differentiation level of the self can be increased in a relatively short period (18 months), by means of a unifying personal development program. This program can be applied to any person. However, it would be best if psychology students or young psychologists benefitted from its advantages right after graduation. A high differentiation level will enable the young psychologist to benefit from a great autonomy in relation to his clients, in the context of a profound contact with them. A low differentiation level of the self determines a superficial contact dictated by the fear of emotional contagion or by the fusion type of contact within which, the emotional experiences of the two persons overlap and interfere. Consequently, the objectivity in communication and intervention would be altered.

The limit of this study consists of the inexistence of a participants' selection criterion. Therefore, the two groups have not had equal levels of the measured variables. The research conducted on this study sample (120) was possible just by accepting some of the participants' wish to take part in the experimental sample.

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